

PR

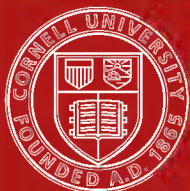
6025

A177P8

CORNELL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY



BOUGHT WITH THE INCOME
OF THE SAGE ENDOWMENT
FUND GIVEN IN 1891 BY
HENRY WILLIAMS SAGE



Cornell University
Library

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.

<http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924013657295>

Copyright, 1918, by
THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY COMPANY

35555 B
73
5

A PORT SAID MISCELLANY

BY WILLIAM MCFEE

I

THERE has come upon us, suddenly, one of those inexplicable lulls which make the experienced seafarer in the Mediterranean recall bygone voyages out East. It is as if the ship had run abruptly into some sultry and airless chamber of the ocean, a chamber whose cobalt roof has shut down tight, and through which not a breath is moving. The smoke from the funnel, of a sulphurous bronze color, even while our trail yet lies somnolent in a long smear on the horizon, now goes straight to the zenith. The iron bulwarks are as hot as hand can bear, as the westering sun glows full upon the beam. Under the awnings the troops lie gasping on their rubber sheets, enduring silently and uncomprehendingly, like dumb animals.

Far ahead, the escort crosses and recrosses our course. Still farther ahead, a keen eye can detect a slight fraying of the taut blue line of the horizon. Signals break from the escort and are answered from our bridge. I turn to a sergeant who is shambling to and fro by the machine-room door, and inform him that Port Said is in sight, and that he will be in harbor in an hour or so.

And then, just as suddenly as we entered, the door of that heated chamber of the sea opens and we pass out into a warm humid wind. The wind and the news wake everybody. The soldiers, who have encamped on our after-deck during the voyage, suddenly display a feverish activity. Rations are packed, rifles are cleaned, and I am in the full tide of popular favor because I permit oil-

reservoirs to be replenished in the machine-room and furnish those priceless fragments of old emery cloth which give such a delectable and silvery gloss to the bolts. Later, I am so popular that I could almost stand for Parliament, for I tell the sergeant that each man can fill his water-bottle with iced water. Which they proceed to do at once, so that said water gets red-hot before the moment of disembarkation!

But take a look at these men on our after-deck while we are coming up to Port Said. You have never seen them before and you will not see them again, for they are bound for Bagdad and beyond. They are very representative, for they are of all ages, races, and regiments. They are going to join units which have been transferred. Three were hours in the water when their ship was torpedoed. Several have come overland across France and Italy, and got most pleasantly hung up at entrancing cities on the way. Others have come out of hospitals and trenches in Macedonia and France and Flanders. They are Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and English. The sergeant, now thumbing a worn pocket-book, has seen service in India, China, Egypt, and France.

Behind him, on the hatch, is a boy of eighteen who wears the uniform of the most famous regiment in the British Army. He is small for his age, and he has a most engaging smile. When I asked him how on earth he got into the Army he explained that he had 'misriprisinted his age.' He has a chum, a gaunt Highlander, who scarcely opened his lips all the voyage, and who sat on the hatch sewing buttons on their clothes, darning their stockings, and reading a religious pamphlet entitled *Doing it Now*.

There is another sergeant, too, a young gentleman going home to get a commission. He is almost to be described as one apart, for he holds no converse with the others. He

walks in a mincing way, he has a gold watch with a curb-chain on one wrist, a silver identification plate and a silver slave-bangle from Saloniki on the other, and an amethyst ring on one of his fingers. As the Chief Engineer said to me one day, he needed only a spear and a ring through his nose to be a complete fighting man. However, in this war it is unwise to make snap judgments. I understand that this young gentleman has an aptitude for certain esoteric brain-work of vast use in artillery. He never goes near the firing-line at all. Our young friend Angus MacFadden has that job. When the young gentleman with the slave-bangle and gold-mounted fountain-pen and expensive Kodak has figured out certain calculations in his dug-out office, Angus, who resembles an extremely war-like bellhop, with his gaunt Highland chum beside him, will scramble up out of his trench, make a most determined rush toward a given point, and, in short, complete the job, whatever it may be.

Now it is all very well to talk about the triumphs of mind over matter, but my interest is not with the young gentleman at all. He may carry Omar Khayyam in his kit. He may call the 'Shropshire Lad' 'topping poetry.' He may (as he does) borrow Swinburne from my book-shelf. My interest is with Angus and his chums. I look out of my machine-room window and watch them getting ready to disembark. They are very amusing, with their collapsible aluminium pannikins, their canvas wash-basins and buckets, their fold-up shaving tackle and telescopic tooth-brushes.

There is one tough old private of the Old Army among them. He has the Egyptian and two South African medals. He never seems to have any kit to bother him. I see him in the galley, peeling potatoes for their dinner, deep in conversation with the pantryman and smoking an Irish

clay. He knows all the twenty-one moves, as we say. Then there is a very young man who reads love stories all the time, a rosy-cheeked lad with the Distinguished Service Order ribbon on his tunic.

Another, almost as young, is tremendously interested in refrigeration. He comes into my engine-room and stares in rapt incredulity at the snow on the machine. 'I don't see why it does n't melt!' he complains, as if he had a grievance. 'How *do* you freeze? if it isn't a rude question.'

I explain briefly how we utilize the latent heat of re-evaporation peculiar to certain gaseous media, in order to reduce the temperature. He turns on me with a rush of frankness and bursts out, 'But, you know, that's all Greek to me!' Well, I suggest, his soldiering's all Greek to me, come to that. He laughs shortly, with his eyes on the ever-moving engines, and says he supposes so. By and by he begins to talk of his experiences in Macedonia. He thinks the sea is beautiful, after the bare hot gulches and ravines. He is so fair that the sun has burned his face and knees pink instead of brown. I asked him what he was doing before the war, and he said his father had a seed-farm in Essex and he himself was learning the business.

Meanwhile we have arrived at Port Said. The engines stop and go astern violently, and the pilot comes alongside in a boat and climbs the rope-ladder. Just ahead is the breakwater, with a couple of motor patrols keeping guard over the fairway. Our escort puts on speed and goes in, for her job with us is done. She has gone in to coal, and she will be ready in a few hours to take another transport out. She and her sisters are like us — they are never through. The big ships may lie for days, or even weeks, in harbor. We small fry have to hurry. Back and forth we ply without ceasing. Sometimes we run ashore in our haste, and so make less speed. Sometimes we

smash into each other in the dark, and have to stagger back to port and refit with all possible expedition. Sometimes, too, we go out and never come back, and nobody save the authorities and our relatives hears anything about it. To what end? Well — and herein lies my interest in those soldiers of the King on the after-deck — the one ultimate object we have in view is to get Master Angus MacFadden and his chums into that front-line trench, to keep them there, warm and fed, and fully supplied with every possible assistance when they climb over the parapet to make the aforesaid rush. Everything else, when you come to think of it, is subordinate to that.

The ship goes at half-speed now past the breakwater, a long gray finger pointing northwards from the beach. Half-way along we pass the De Lesseps statue on its high pedestal, the right hand flung out in a grandiose gesture toward the supreme achievement of his life. The warm wind from the westward is sending up the sea to break in dazzling white foam on the yellow sand below the pink and blue and brown bathing-huts. The breakwater is crowded with citizens taking the air, for the walks of Port Said are restricted and flavored with the odors of Arabian domesticity. We pass on, and the hotels and custom-house buildings come into view. All around are the transients of the ocean, anchored and for a moment at rest. Past the Canal building we steam, a pretentious stucco affair with three green-tiled domes and deep Byzantine galleries. Past also Navy House, a comely white building in the Venetian style, recalling the Doge's Palace — an illusion heightened by the fleet of patrols anchored in front, busily getting ready to go out to work.

And then we stop, and manœuvre, and go astern; tugs whistle imperiously, motor-boats buzz around us, ropes are hurriedly ferried across to buoys and quays, and we

are made fast and pulled into our berth alongside of an immense vessel which has come from the other side of the world with frozen meat to feed Master Angus and his chums. But by this time it is dark. The ochreous sheen on the sky behind Port Said is darkening to purple and violet, the stars are shining peacefully over us, and the sergeant comes to ask for a lantern by which to finish packing his kit.

It has been warm during the day, but now it is stifling. We are, as I said, close alongside a great ship. She extends beyond us and towers above us, and even the warm humid breeze of Port Said in August is shut out from us. Up from below comes a suffocating stench of hot bilge. The ship is invaded by a swarm of Arab cargo-men, who begin immediately to load us from our neighbor. Cargo lights, of a ghastly blue color, appear at the hatchways. Angus and his chums take up their kits and fall in on the bridge-deck. Officers hurry to and fro. Hatches are taken off, and the cold air of the holds comes up in thin wisps of fog into the tropic night. Winches rattle. Harsh words of French and Arabic commingle with the more intelligible shouts of the ship's officers. All night this goes on. All night proceeds this preposterous traffic in frozen corpses, amid the dim blue radiance of the cargo-clusters. Hundreds upon hundreds of frozen corpses!

I go off watch at eight and, seated in a room like a Turkish bath, I try to concentrate on the letters which have come over the sea. I am seized with a profound depression, arising, I suppose, from the bizarre discrepancy between the moods communicated by the letters and my own weariness. Most letters are so optimistic in tone. They clap one on the back and give one breezy news of the flowers in New Jersey gardens, of the heat in New Orleans, of bombs in London and reunions in English

houses. All very nice; but I have to get up at two, and the thermometer over my bunk is now registering a hundred Fahrenheit. An electric fan buzzes and snaps in the corner and seems only to make the air hotter. An Arab passes in the alleyway outside and calls to some one named Achmet in an unmelodious howl. (All male Arabs are named Achmet apparently.)

I sit in my pajamas, with the letters in my hand, and wonder how long it is going to last. Another week or so and we shall have had two years of it. Most of us have gone home on leave. Counting the commander, there are — let me see — four of us left of the original crowd. It is over a year since I applied for leave. Nothing will come of it. I look into the future and see myself, a gray elderly failure, still keeping a six-hour shift on a Mediterranean transport, my life spent, my friends and relatives all dead, Angus and his chums gone west, and a new generation coming out, with vigorous appetites for fresh provisions.

And then the door opens and lets in a slight uniformed figure with a grip in his hand and a familiar smile on his face. Lets in also liberty, freedom, pay-day, England, Home and Beauty.

It is my relief, arrived at last!

II

We greet each other shyly, for the chief and some of the others are standing in the alleyway, with broad grins on their faces at my look of flabbergasted bewilderment. An Arab porter comes along with a big canvas bag of dunnage, which he dumps at our feet.

‘Why — what — how — when — did you get here?’ I ask weakly.

‘Train from Alexandria,’ he replies, sitting down on the settee.

My kitten, a sandy little savage known as O'Henry, jumps up and begins to make friends. O'Henry is stroked and tickled, and Tommy looks up at me with his old tolerant, bland, imperturbable smile.

'You, of all people!' I remark, looking at him inanely.

'Aye, they sent me out,' he affirms. 'They told me you were here. How's things?'

The others go away, still smiling, and I shut the door. For this young chap, who has come across Europe to relieve me, is an old shipmate. We were on the Merovingian. We have been many voyages to Rio and the Plates. We were always chums. In some obscure fashion, we got on. Tommy is North Country — dry, taciturn, reticent, slow to make friends. A hot-air merchant makes him restive and he goes away. He abhors bluffers. I like him. We have never written, though, for it is a fact that some friendships do not 'carry' in a letter. They are like some wines — they do not travel. For all I knew, I was never to see him again. What of that? We had been chums and we understood each other. I had often thought of him since I'd been out here — a good little shipmate. And now here he was, on my settee, smiling and tickling O'Henry just where he likes to be tickled, and asking me to come ashore with him.

Will I come ashore with him? Will I not? I drag open drawers, fling out a white-drill suit, and begin to dress. I open the door and shout to the messman to go and get a boat and bring my shoes and some hot water. While I shave, Tommy relates his adventures in a sketchy way. He has no gift of tongues, but now and again he strikes out a phrase that brings the picture before me. He has been torpedoed. He was in the Malthusian when she was 'plugged.' He was on watch, of course, — Thirds always are on watch when anything happens. I used to tell him

that he was the original of Browning's 'Shadowy Third,' he is so small, with delicate hands and that charming, elusive, shadowy smile.

Oh, I remark, as I reach for the talcum powder, he was torpedoed, was he? He nods and smiles at O'Henry's trick of falling off the settee head over heels. And the poor old Malthusian too,—what a box of tricks she was, with her prehistoric pumps and effervescent old dynamo,—gone at last, eh? Tommy says nothing about the catastrophe save that he lost his gear. Then, he observes, he joined the Polynesian as Third, having, of course, got himself fresh gear. Ah, and had I heard about the Polynesian? She's gone too, he said, letting O'Henry down to the floor by his tail. What? Torpedoed too? It must be a sort of habit with him. Good Heavens! But no, says Tommy, she was attacked, but she got away, and —

'It was a funny thing,' he adds meditatively; and looks at me as though he could n't make it out.

'What,' I ask, 'what happened?' as I look around for my stick and cigar-case.

'Oh, I'll tell you when we get ashore,' he says; and he rolls O'Henry into a ball and drops him on my bunk.

'Come on, then. — Sam! Got that boat?'

A negro voice howls, 'Yes, sah,' and we go out and down the ladder.

A three-quarter moon is coming up, hangs now over Palestine, and Port Said, the ancient Pelusium, takes on a serene splendor inconceivable to those who have seen her only in the hard dusty glare of noon-day. The harsh outlines of the ships soften to vague shadows touched with silver; the profound gloom within the colonnades of the Canal building, the sheen of the moonlight on green domes and gray stucco walls make of it a fairy palace of mist and emerald. Each motor-launch speeding past leaves a

broadening, heaving furrow of phosphorescence. Each dip of our oars breaks the dark water into an incredible swirl of boiling greenish-white radiance.

Tommy and I sit side by side in the stern in silence as the Arab boatman, in blue gown and round white cap, pulls us up to the Custom-House quay. We pass out at a side gate and find ourselves in Egyptian darkness. Whether this is due to military exigencies or to a shortage of fuel, nobody seems to know. The hotel buildings along the front throw their shadows right across the Sharia el Legera, down which we pass until we reach the broad dusty Rue el Nil, a boulevard running straight down to the sea. We are bound for the Eastern Exchange Hotel, familiarly known as 'The Eastern.' It is the grand rallying-point of mariners east and west of Suez. It is a huge gaunt structure of glass and iron, built over to the curb of the street and the arcade under it is full of green chairs and tables, green shrubs in enormous tubs, and climbing plants twined about the iron stanchions. The lights are shrouded in green petroleum cans, and one has the illusion of sitting in the glade of some artificial forest. Hotel waiters, in long white robes cut across with brilliant scarlet sashes, and surmounted by scarlet fezes, move noiselessly to and fro with trays of drinks. An orchestra, somewhere beyond, plays a plaintive air.

All around are uniforms naval and military, British, French, Italian, and so forth. It is here, I say, that East and West do meet. Here the skipper from Nagasaki finds an old shipmate just in from New Orleans. Here a chief engineer, burned brown and worn thin by a summer at Basra, drinks with a friend bound East from Glasgow to Rangoon. Here the gossip of all the ports of the Seven Seas changes hands over the little tables under the dim green-shaded lights. Outside, beyond the screen of ver-

ture, a carriage will go by stealthily in the dust, a cigar glowing under the hood. Itinerant salesmen of peanuts in glass boxes, beads, Turkish delight, postals, cigarettes, news-sheets, postage-stamps, and all the other passenger junk, pass to and fro. A native conjurer halts as we sit down, sadly produces a dozen lizards from an apparently empty fez, and passes on as I look coldly upon his peripatetic legerdemain. Here and there parties of residents sit round a table — a French family, perhaps, or Italian, or Maltese, or Greek, or Hebrew, or Syrian — for they are all to be found here in Pelusium, the latter making money out of their conquerors, just as, I dare say, they did in Roman times. Papa is smoking a cigarette; Mamma is sitting back surveying the other denizens of the artificial forest through her lorgnon; the young ladies converse with a couple of youthful 'subs' in khaki, and a bare-legged boy, in an enormous pith hat like an inverted bath, is haggling over half a piastre with a vender of peanuts. Tommy and I sit in the shadow of a shrub and I order gin and lime-juice. He wants beer, but there is no beer — only some detestable carbonated bilge-water at half a dollar (ten piastres) the bottle.

And soldiers go by continually to and from the cafés and canteens. Many are Colonials, and their wide-brimmed hats decorated with feathers give them an extraordinarily dissipated air. There is something very un-English about these enormous, loose-limbed, rolling fighting-men, with their cheeks the color of raw beef and their truculent eyes under their wide hats. They remind me at times of the professional soldiers of my school-days, who dressed in scarlet and gold and were a race apart. As they pass us, in twos and threes and singly, slouching and jingling their spurs, and roll off into darkness again, I think of Master Angus MacFadden and his chums, and I wonder what the

future holds for us all. Then I hear Tommy talking and I begin to listen.

No use trying to tell the story as he told it. Whoever thinks he can, is the victim of an illusion. Tommy's style, like his personality, is not literary. I often wonder, when I think of the sort of life he has led, how he comes to express himself at all. For he often startles me with some queer semi-articulate flash of intuition. A direct challenge to Life! As when he said, looking up at me as we leaned over the bulwarks and watched the sun rise one morning in the Caribbean, 'Yo' know, I have n't *had* any life.'

Well, as I said, he and I are chums on some mysteriously taciturn, North Country principle that won't bear talking about! And I must tell the story in my own way, merely quoting a phrase now and then. I owe him that much because, you see, he was there.

III

That voyage he made in the Polynesian was her usual London to South American ports. And nothing happened until they were homeward bound and making Ushant. It was a glorious day, as clear as it ever is in northern waters, and the Third Mate was astonished to see through his glasses what he took to be land. Ushant already! As he looked, he saw a flash and his wonder deepened. He told himself, well, he'd be blowed! A tremendous bang a hundred yards abeam of the Polynesian nearly shook him overboard. It has come at last, then!

The Old Man came from his room, running sideways, his face set in a kind of spasm, and stood by the rail, clutching it as if petrified. The Third Mate, a friend of Tommy's, pointed and handed the binocular just in time for the Old Man to see another flash. The morning telegraph clanged

and jangled. The Third Mate ran to the telephone and was listening, when the second shell, close to the bows, exploded on the water and made him drop the receiver. Then he heard the Old Man order the helm over — over — over, whirling his arm to emphasize the vital need of putting it hard over. A few moments of tense silence, and then, with a roar that nearly split all their ear-drums, the Polynesian's six-inch anti-raider gun loosed off at nine thousand yards.

So you must envisage this obscure naval engagement on that brilliant summer day in the green Atlantic. Not a ripple to spoil the aim, not a cloud in the sky, as the two gunners, their sleeves rolled to the shoulders, their bodies heaving, thrust a fresh shell and cartridge into the breech, shoved in the cap, and swung the block into place with the soft 'cluck' of steel smeared with vaseline. As the ship veers, the gun is trained steady on the gray dot. Nine thousand and fifty, no deflection — 'Stand away!' There is another roar, and the gunner, who has stood away, now stands with his feet apart, his elbows out, staring with intense concentration through his glasses.

Down below, the engine-room staff, which included Tommy doing a field-day on the spare generator, were clustered on the starting platform. The expansion links had been opened out full, — any locomotive driver will show you what I mean, — and the Polynesian's engines, four thousand seven hundred horse-power indicated, driven by steam at two hundred pounds to the square inch from her four Scotch boilers, were turning eighty-nine revolutions per minute and making very good going for her, but nothing to write home about, when a modern submersible cruiser doing sixteen knots on the surface was pelting after her. The tremendous explosions of the six-inch gun discouraged conversation.

The Chief Engineer, a tall man with a full chestnut moustache and a stern contemptuous expression born of his hatred of sea-life, was striding up and down the plates. The Second appeared, like Ariel, around, above, below, intent on sundry fidgets of his own, and whistling — nobody knew why. The Fourth was in the stokehold and back in the engine-room every ten minutes. The Fifth, as though he had been naughty and was being punished by that stern man with the four gold-and-purple wings on his sleeve, was standing with his face to the wall, big rubber navy-phone receivers on his ears and his eyes fixed in a rapt saintly way on two ground-glass discs above him, one of which was aglow and bore the legend *More Revolutions*. The other, *Less Revolutions*, was dull and out of use. So he stood, waiting for verbal orders.

All the revolutions possible were being supplied, for the safety-valves were lifting with an occasional throaty flutter. Unexpectedly the Second would appear from the tunnel, where he had been feeling the stern gland, and would hover lovingly over the thrust-block, whistling, amid the clangor of four thousand seven hundred horsepower, 'Love me, and the world is mine.'

Suddenly all was swallowed up, engulfed, in one heart-shattering explosion on deck. It was so tremendous that the Fifth's head involuntarily darted out from the receivers and he looked sharply at the Chief, who was standing stock-still with his long legs apart, his hands in his coat pockets, staring over his shoulder with stern intentness into vacancy. The telephone bell brayed out a call and the Fifth fitted his head once again to the receiver. 'Yes, sir!' he sang out; and then, to the others, 'We're gainin' on her! We're gainin' on her!' Tommy goes on methodically with his dynamo. He is close at hand when wanted, ready, resourceful, devoid of panic. The excitement is on

deck, where the shell has struck the house amidships, blowing the galley ranges and bakehouse ovens overboard, killed three men outright, and left two more mere moving horrors on the slaughter-house floor. Another, a scullion, with his hand cut off at the wrist, is running round and round, falling over the wreckage, and pursued by a couple of stewards with bandages and friar's balsam.

And on that gray dot, now nine thousand five hundred yards astern, there is excitement too, no doubt, for it seems authentic that the Polynesian's third shot hit the forward gun-mounting, and the list caused by this, heavy things slewing over, the damage to the deck, the rupture of certain vital oil-pipes, and the wounds of the crew, would account for the Polynesian, with her fourteen-point-seven knots, gaining on U 999, supposed to have sixteen knots on the surface.

On the bridge of the Polynesian, too, there is excitement of sorts. The Chief Mate, who has been rushing about, helping the ammunition carriers, then assisting the stewards with their rough surgery, then up on the bridge again, has come up and is prancing up and down, every now and then looking hard at the Old Man, who stares through the telescope at the gray dot.

Something awful had happened. When that shell hit the ship, the Old Man had called out hoarsely, 'That's enough — oh, enough — boats!' and the Chief Mate, to the horror of the young Third Mate, who told Tommy about it, grabbed the Old Man round the waist, whirled him into the chart-room, and slammed the door upon them both. The Third Mate says he saw, through the window, the Chief Mate's fist half-an-inch from the Old Man's nose, the Old Man looking at it in gloomy silence, and the Chief Mate's eyes nearly jumping out of his head as he argued and threatened and implored. '. . . Gainin' on

her,' was all the Third Mate could hear, and '. . . For God's sake, sir!' and such-like strong phrases. So the Third Mate says. And then they came out again, and the Mate telephoned to the engine-room.

IV

The company is dwindling now, for, as Tommy gulps his drink and orders two more, it is on the stroke of nine, when the bars close, and folks are melting group by group into the darkness. Some are bound for home, some for 'Eldorado,' a dusty barn where one watches dreadful melodramatic films and faints with the heat. The lights are turned still lower. The few shops which have been open in a stealthy way now shut up close. The moonlight throws sharp blue-black shadows on the white dust of the Rue el Nil. The orchestra fades away; chairs are stacked between the tubs, and reproachful glances are cast upon the dozen or so of us who still linger in the gloom.

I become aware that Tommy, in his own odd little semi-articulate fashion, is regarding me as though he had some extraordinary anxiety on his mind. That is the way his expression strikes me. As though he had had some tremendous experience and did n't know what to make of it. I remember seeing something like it in the face of a youth, religiously brought up, who was listening for the first time to an atheist attempting to shake the foundations of his faith. And while I ruminate upon this unusual portent in Tommy's physiognomy, he plunges into the second part of his story. It has its own appeal to those who love and understand the sea.

For the rest of the day the Polynesian's course was a series of intricate convolutions on the face of the Atlantic. As the Third Mate put it in his lively way, you could have played it on a piano. Owing to the wireless room having

been partially demolished, they were out of touch with the world, and the commander felt lonely. He even regretted for a while that he had not retired. Was just going to, when the War came. He was sixty years old, and had been an easygoing skipper for twenty years now. This, — and he wiped his moist face with his handkerchief, — this was n't at all what he had bargained for when he had volunteered to carry on 'for the duration of the War.' Men dead and dying and mutilated, ship torn asunder — He sat on his settee and stared hard at the head and shoulders of the man at the wheel, adumbrated on the ground-glass window in front of him. He had turned sick at the sight down there —

But the Polynesian was still going. Not a bolt, rivet, plate, or rod of her steering and propelling mechanism had been touched, and she was galloping northwest by west at thirteen knots. The commander hoped for a dark night, for in his present perturbed state the idea of being torpedoed at night was positively horrible. The Brobdignagian, now, was hit at midnight and sunk in three minutes with all hands but two. He wiped his face again. He felt that he was n't equal to it.

It was dark. All night it was dark and moonless. All night they galloped along up-Channel. All night the Old Man walked the bridge, watching the blackness ahead. At four o'clock the Mate came on watch and the Old Man felt that he must lie down. He was over sixty years old, remember, and he had been on his feet for eighteen hours. The Chief Mate, who had been strangely shy since his outrageous behavior, merely remarked that it looked as if it might be thick presently, and began to pace to and fro.

What happened, — if anything did happen, — nobody seemed to know; but Tommy, who came off at four, and was enjoying a pipe, a cup of cocoa, and a game of patience

in his room, was suddenly flung endways against his wardrobe, and a series of grinding crashes, one of which sent his porthole glass in a burst of fragments over his bed-place, buckled the plates of the ship's side. He remembered that the wardrobe door flew open as he sprang up, and his derby hat bounced to the floor.

He at once skipped down below, where he found the Second and Chief trying to carry out a number of rapid contradictory orders from the telegraph. And as he joined them the telegraph whirled from *Full astern* to *Stand by*, and stopped. They stood by. Tommy was told to go and finish 'changing over,' which involves opening and shutting several mysterious valves. Having achieved this, he took up his station by the telegraph.

The Chief, clad in a suit of rumpled but elegant pink-and-saffron-striped pajamas, prowled to and fro in front of the engines like one of the larger carnivora in front of his cage. The Second, with the sleeves of his coat rolled up, as if he were a conjuror and wished to show there was no deception, produced a cigarette from his ear, a match from an invisible ledge under the log-desk, and then caused himself to disappear into the stokehold, whistling a tune at one time very popular in Dublin called 'Mick McGilligan's Daughter Mary Ann.' He returned in some mysterious fashion, smoking with much enjoyment, and reporting greaser, firemen, and Tommies all gone up on deck.

And so they waited, those three, and waited, and waited; and the dawn came up, ineffably tender, and far up above them through the skylights they saw the stars through the fog turn pale, and still there was no sign, the telegraph finger pointing, in its mute peremptory way, at *Stand by*. They were standing by.

And at length it grew to be past endurance. The Chief

spoke sharply into the telephone. Nothing. Suddenly he turned and ordered Tommy to go up and see what was doing. The Second, coming in from the stokehold, reported water in the cross-bunker, but the doors were down. So Tommy went up the long ladders and out on deck and stood stock still before the great experience of his life. For they were alone on the ship, those three. The boats were gone. There was no sound, save the banging of the empty blocks and the gurgle and slap of the sea against her sides.

For a moment, Tommy said, he 'had no heart.' The sheer simplicity of the thing unmanned him, as well it might. He had n't words — Gone! Behind the horror lay another horror, and it was the reminiscence of this ultimate apprehension that I saw in his face to-night. And then he threw himself backward (a North Country football trick), turned, and rushed for the ladder. The other two, down below, saw him there, his eyes feverish, his face dark and anxious, his usually low voice harsh and strident, as he prayed them to drop everything and come up quick — come on — and his voice trailed off into huskiness and heavy breathing.

When they came up, which happened immediately, four steps at a time, they found him sprawled against the bulwarks, his chin on his hands, looking as though to fix the scene forever on his brain. And they looked too, and turned faint, for there, far across the darkling sparkle of the sea, were the boats, and on the sky-line a smear of smoke. So they stood, each in a characteristic attitude — Tommy asprawl on the rail, the Second halfway up the bridge-deck ladder, one hand on his hip, the Chief with his hands behind him, his long legs widely planted, his head well forward, scowling. They were as Tommy put it, 'in a state.' It was n't, you know, the actual danger: it was the carrying away of their faith in the world of living men.

Good God! And I imagine the prevailing emotion in their hearts at this moment was instinct in the lad's query to me — 'What was the use of goin' back, or making a fight of it, if *that* was all they thought of us?' And then the Polynesian recalled them from speculations as to the ultimate probity of the human soul by giving a sudden lunge forward. She was sinking.

For a moment, Tommy says, they were 'in a state.' I should imagine they were. They began running round and round the deck, picking up pieces of wood and dropping them in a shamefaced manner. Suddenly the Chief remembered the raft — an unfortunate structure of oil-barrels and hatches. It was on the foredeck, a frowsy incumbrance devised by the Mate in a burst of ingenuity against the fatal day. When the three of them arrived on the foredeck their hopes sank again. A single glance showed the impossibility of lifting it without steam on the winches. They stood round it and deliberated in silence, tying on life-belts which they had picked up on the bridge-deck. The Polynesian gave another lunge, and they climbed on the raft and held tight.

The Polynesian was in her death-throes. She had been cut through below the bridge, and the water was filling the cross-bunker and pressing the air in Number 2 hold up against the hatches. While they sat there waiting, the tarpaulins on the hatch ballooned up and burst like a gunshot, releasing the air improvised within. She plunged again, and the sea poured over her bulwarks and cascaded around them. The raft slid forward against a winch, skinning the Second's leg against a wheelguard. They held on.

Now, it is perfectly simple in theory to sit on a raft and allow a ship to sink under you. The ship sinks, and the raft, retaining its buoyancy, floats. Quite simple, in theory. In practice, however, many factors tend to vitiate the

simplicity of it. Indeed, it becomes so difficult that only by the mercy of God could anybody attempt it and survive. The fore-deck of the Polynesian was like the fore-deck of most ships, cluttered up with hatch-combings, winches, ventilator-cowls, steampipes, masts, derricks, bollards, snatch-blocks, dead-eyes, ladders, and wire-rope drums. Look forward from the promenade next time you make a trip, and conceive it. As the Polynesian subsided, she wallowed. Her centre of gravity was changing every second, and the raft, with its three serious passengers, was charging to and fro as if it were alive and trying to escape. It carried away a ventilator, and then, for one horrible instant, was caught in the standing rigging and canted over. A rush to starboard released it, and the next moment it was free. Only the windlass on the fore-castle-head was now above water forward.

They saw nothing more of her. Not that she vanished all at once, but the sucking whirlpools in which the raft was turning over and reeling back on them kept them fully occupied. And when at last they had coughed up the seawater and wiped their eyes and looked at each other as they floated in the gentle swell of a smiling summer sea, she was gone. Only one thing destroyed their peace and stood up before them like a spectre: she was lying at the bottom, with her telegraph at *Stand by*. The deathless sporting spirit of the race was expressed in these words: 'You know, if it had n't been for *that*, it was a joke, man!'

The moon rides high over Pelusium as we go back to the ship. Tommy and I will keep the morning watch together for once and talk over old times. Tomorrow I shall go through the hot white dust of the Rue el Nil and be paid off in the consul's office for my two years' labor. There is a mail-boat next week, and perhaps I shall board her, passenger-fashion, and go across the blue Mediterranean,

through sunny France, across the English Channel, where the Polynesian stands by forever, up through Sussex orchards and over Surrey downs. And perhaps, as I idle away the autumn in the dim beauty of the Essex fenland, and as we drive in the pony-cart through the lanes, we shall stop and the children will say, 'If you stand up, you can see the sea.'

Perhaps. Who knows?

ATLANTIC READINGS

Teachers everywhere are cordially welcoming our series of *Atlantic Readings*; for material not otherwise available is here published for classroom use in convenient and inexpensive form. In most cases the selections reprinted have been suggested by teachers in schools and colleges where a need for a particular essay or story has been urgently felt. Supplied for one institution, the reprint has created an immediate market elsewhere.

The Atlantic Monthly Press most warmly invites conference and correspondence that will suggest additions to this growing list. It is of course apparent from the titles below that the material is chosen only in part from the files of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

The titles already published follow:—

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. THE LIE
By Mary Antin | 8. INTENSIVE LIVING
By Cornelia A. P. Comer |
| 2. RUGGS—R.O.T.C.
By William Addleman Ganoe | 9. THE PRELIMINARIES
By Cornelia A. P. Comer |
| 3. JUNGLE NIGHT
By William Beebe | 10. THE MORAL EQUIVA-
LENT OF WAR
By William James |
| 4. AN ENGLISHWOMAN'S
MESSAGE
By Mrs. A. Burnett-Smith | 11. THE STUDY OF POETRY
By Matthew Arnold |
| 5. A FATHER TO HIS FRESH-
MAN SON
A FATHER TO HIS GRAD-
UATE GIRL
By Edward Sanford Martin | 12. BOOKS
By Arthur C. Benson |
| 6. A PORTSAID MISCELLANY
By William McFee | 13. ON COMPOSITION
By Lafcadio Hearn |
| 7. EDUCATION: THE MASTERY
OF THE ARTS OF LIFE
By Arthur E. Morgan | 14. THE BASIC PROBLEM OF
DEMOCRACY
By Walter Lippmann |
| 15. THE PILGRIMS OF PLYMOUTH
By Henry Cabot Lodge | |
| Other titles to follow | |

List Price, 15 cents each
Except Number 15, 25c

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS, INC.
8 ARLINGTON STREET, BOSTON (17)

ATLANTIC TEXTS

TEXTBOOKS IN LIBRARY FORM

ATLANTIC CLASSICS, <i>First Series</i>	\$1.50
ATLANTIC CLASSICS, <i>Second Series</i>	1.50
Both volumes collected and edited by ELLERY SEDOWICK, Editor of the <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> . For the class in American literature.	
ESSAYS AND ESSAY-WRITING	1.25
Collected and edited by WILLIAM M. TANNER, University of Texas. For literature and composition classes.	
ATLANTIC NARRATIVES, <i>First Series</i>	1.25
For college use in classes studying the short story.	
ATLANTIC NARRATIVES, <i>Second Series</i>	1.25
For secondary schools. Both volumes collected and edited by CHARLES SWAIN THOMAS, Editorial department of the Atlantic Monthly Press, and Lecturer in Harvard University.	
ATLANTIC PROSE AND POETRY	1.00
Collected and edited by CHARLES SWAIN THOMAS and HARRY G. PAUL of the University of Illinois. A literary reader for upper grammar grades and junior high schools.	
THE PROFESSION OF JOURNALISM	1.25
Collected and edited by WILLARD G. BLEYER, University of Wisconsin. For college use.	
THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY AND ITS MAKERS....	1.00
By M. A. DeWOLFE HOWE, Editorial department of the Atlantic Monthly Press. Biographical and literary matter for the English class.	
WRITING THROUGH READING	.90
By ROBERT M. GAY, Simmons College. A short course in English Composition for colleges and normal schools.	
THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS: The Principle and the Prac- tice	2.50
Edited by STEPHEN P. DOGOAN, College of the City of New York. A basic text on international relations.	
THE LIGHT: An Educational Pageant	.65
By CATHERINE T. BRYCE, Yale University. Especially suitable for public presentation at Teachers' Conventions.	
PATRONS OF DEMOCRACY	.80
By DALLAS LORE SHARP, Boston University. For classes interested in discussing democracy in our public schools.	
AMERICANS BY ADOPTION	1.50
By JOSEPH HUERAND. For Americanization courses.	
THE VOICE OF SCIENCE IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY LITERATURE	
Collected and edited by ROBERT E. ROGERS and by H. G. PEARSON, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An anthology of nineteenth-century prose and poetry.	
	2.00

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS, INC.
8 ARLINGTON STREET, BOSTON (17)

Cornell University Library
PR 6025.A177P8

A Port Said miscellany.



3 1924 013 657 295

olin

